

POVERTY, PIONEERS AND PATRIOTS

THE STORY OF THE WILLIAMS, WOOD AND STEPHENS FAMILIES

Remember each stage in life shapes your outlook
As you try to slow your descent
On the strange journey to the grave

From the gravestone of
Nicholas Wood 1748-1836

Those Loyalists who have adhered to the Unity of the Empire and joined the Royal Standard before the Treaty of Separation in 1873, and all their Children and their Descendants, are to be distinguished by the following Capitals affixed to their name: U.E., alluding to their great principle- The Unity of the Empire.

God said "My rainbow I set in the cloud, as a sign of the covenant
between Myself and earth. When I cloud the sky over the earth,
the rainbow shall be seen in the cloud."

Genesis 9: verses 13 & 14

Illustrations by: *Barbara* Barbara Nancy Stephens Cooke
Story by: John Franklin Lyndale Stephens



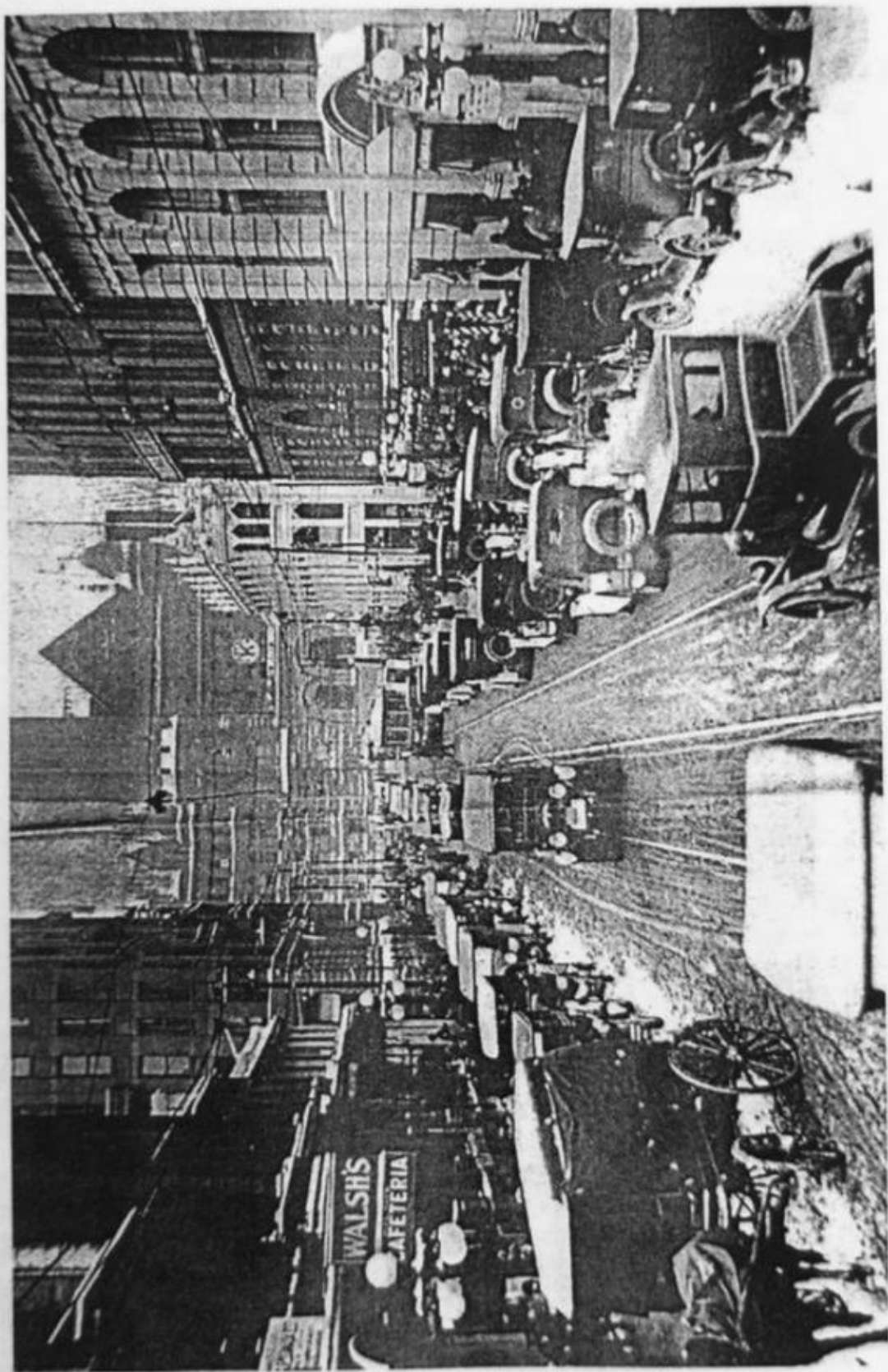


JOHN STEPHENS - 1918 to 1939

You may recall that we originally set out to tell you about the short journey taken by John from Toronto in 1907 to Sicily in 1943. Let us get back to that now. During the war, John attended Dewson Public School, along with some other members of the family. The family lived at 400 Ossington Avenue for several years but the house now at that location seems to have been built since they were there. In March 1918, they moved to 686 Ossington (right), which was described as a big farmhouse style home just south of Bloor Street. The picture shows Pinky and Whitey in front of the prominent wrought iron fence. A church now occupies the site.



After the war, there were thousands of returned soldiers looking for employment, but many businesses had to cut back activity or fold. Workers were trying to protect their jobs and strikes became a common occurrence. Women were seeking more recognition and they were allowed to vote and seek office in Federal Elections in 1918 and in the provinces in 1922. In 1919, more than 15,000,000 people died worldwide from the Spanish Flu epidemic. On the other hand, Banting and Best discovered insulin, which would prolong a vast number of lives.





In the fall of 1919, the family (or that part of it still living at home) was living at 101 Macdonell Ave. (left) and John attended his last year of Public School at Parkdale. In 1920, they purchased their first house at 424 Delaware (right) where they stayed until Maw's death. Upon graduation from grade school in 1920, John spent 4 years at Central Technical School taking what was described on his application as "Industrial" courses. He



graduated with a 4-year Junior Matriculation Certificate in June 1924.

During that period, new manufacturing plants were being established in Ontario to build automobiles, providing many new jobs and the population of Toronto had grown to over 500,000. Sunnyside Amusement Park, where the family would spend a lot of time, opened in 1922, Foster Hewitt broadcast his first hockey game in 1923 and Sir Henry Pellatt went broke and had to move out of Casa Loma. The picture (opposite) shows Bay Street in Downtown Toronto in 1924.

Adolph Hitler had founded the Nazi Party after the war, and he devoted his time in the early 1920's to building it and it's "private army" of Storm troopers (S.A.). France, angered that Germany had defaulted on its second reparation payment in 1923, occupied the Ruhr Valley, which contained much of Germany's industrial base. The resulting chaos and the collapse of the mark resulted in an agreement between France and Germany to seek other ways to deal with reparations. Hitler saw this state of unrest as a chance to take over Germany. However, his attempt to overthrow the government earned him defeat and a prison sentence of 5 years for treason. In fact, he only served 9 months in 1924 and immediately set out to try again.

I have no other information about John until about 1929 - the year of the Great Depression. It would take a lot more knowledge than I have and a lot of space to explain the Great Depression. Let's just say that it started with the crash of the American stock markets in October 1929 and quickly spread throughout the world. Its effects were felt for at least the next 10 years. In Canada, it coincided with a drought in Western Canada, which ruined many farmers and magnified the unemployment, which was a major by-product of the recession. Canadian Comedian Barry Broadfoot remembers his early days on the prairies - *"People at the door begging for a sandwich, a meal, a cement patch for their tire or a glass of water. The terrible winters. People getting caught on the roads and some freezing to death."* It was estimated that almost 50% of Canadians had no income.





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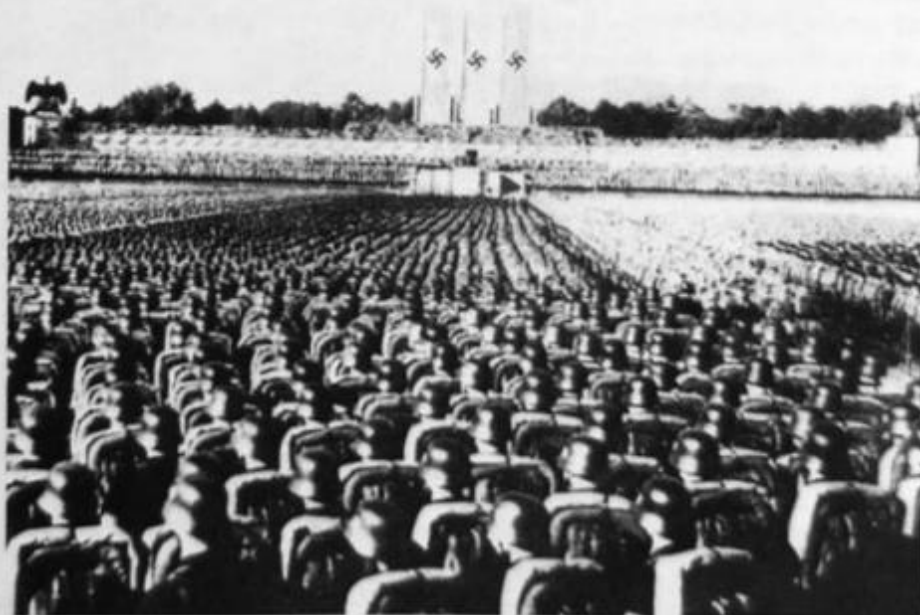
Hitler had worked since 1924 to build up the Nazi Party, and, by 1929, membership had grown to 120,000. Because he had been prophesying disaster but Germany had prospered instead, Hitler was still regarded by many as a fool. The market crash and the depression caused severe harm in Germany, which had been borrowing abroad and exporting German goods. When new loans dried up and the old ones had to be paid back, other countries stopped buying; the German economy collapsed, and unemployment was rampant. Quick to exploit weakness, Hitler blamed the government, which had allowed itself to be "humiliated" after the war by France and its Allies. He also cried out against the threat of Communists in Germany.

To the German army he said - *"If the Marxists succeed, you will become hangmen of the regime and political commissars, and, if you do not behave, your wife and child will be put behind locked doors. If you still don't behave, you will be thrown out and perhaps stood up against a wall, for a human life counts little to those who are out to destroy a people."* (It would seem to me that this is a perfect description of how Hitler operated when he got into power- so I guess it does "take one to know one"). As a result of these events, the Nazi Party captured almost 20% of the parliamentary seats in the election of September 1930, and Hitler and the Nazis became a force to be reckoned with.



Around this time, John (now almost 23) seemed to be earning his living in any way he could. He sold personalized Christmas cards, and worked at a tailor shop, while he was taking a night school course in Accounting. He gradually became aware of a young lady in the neighbourhood named Voy Boag (left). She had worked in the brokerage business as a messenger until the market crashed and I suppose she was having the same difficulty finding work. Voy admitted that she and her sister used to walk by the tailor shop, in case John would see them and they could stop to talk. She also chummed with his twin sisters, and he often stopped at her house on his way home from work to join the neighbours in a singsong (in those days, people had to make their own entertainment, especially during the depression when money was scarce). Apparently he had a lovely tenor voice, which he failed to pass on to me.

In October 1931, Hitler demonstrated the level of popular support he was receiving by addressing a gathering of more than 100,000 Nazi bodyguards and storm troopers (right), featuring a six-hour march past. In effect this was becoming his Nazi Party private army.



...to work at the Maidstone Arms near East Hampton, Long Island, although I have no idea how that came about. The original property was built in 1740 and has been an inn since 1870 and was run by the Osborne Family. There is some indication that he did bookkeeping but the photograph (right) shows that he was also a steward on a yacht called "Dreamer". The Maidstone Arms is still one of the premier Restaurant and B&B operations in The Hamptons, which is the site of many huge mansions owned by business executives, politicians and movie stars.



In early spring, Voy contacted him and told him that she was pregnant. Arrangements were made for Voy, her sister Jean and her father Frank to drive to Long Island, in his 1930 Marquette coupe (left). It was a tight squeeze for three people, especially with the gearshift on the floor. On May 3, 1932, a Justice of the Peace at Riverhead, Long Island, New York, married them, and unless John had brought someone from his work, Jean and Frank Boag were the only witnesses. When John returned from his summer job on Long Island, they moved in with her parents in an upstairs bedroom.

Once more it was election time in Germany. The Nazis promised, that if they came to power, they would reverse the effects of economic depression and unemployment and act firmly in areas where the present government had been unable to bring about meaningful change. On July 31, 1932, the Nazis won 37.3% of the vote and 230 seats, but this fell short of a clear majority. When they were unable to negotiate an acceptable coalition government, the Reichstag was dissolved on September 12 and a new election was called for November 5. Although they still remained by far the largest party in the Chamber, the November results were a decided disappointment to the Nazis, as they only won 33.1% of the vote and 196 seats.

I, John Franklin Lynndale Stephens, was born at Toronto Grace Hospital on November 21, 1932.

On that same day, the President of Germany said to Hitler *"You have declared that you will only place your movement (the Nazi Party) at the disposal of a government of which you are the head. If I consider your proposal, I must demand that such a Cabinet should have a majority in the Reichstag."* It was generally conceded that such a coalition would be impossible to achieve. Nevertheless, through the inability of other groups to form an acceptable coalition, a series of back-room deals, and plain good luck (for him), Hitler was appointed Chancellor on January 30, 1933.

A report from Pierre Van Paasen appearing in the Toronto Star on March 18, 1933 read in part – *"There is no precedent in modern history for the reign of terror that rages in Germany today. 115,000 people have been arrested since the election but not one single trial has been held. On the pretext of a Communist plot, hideously mutilated bodies are found everywhere. The massacre promised long ago by Hitler and his chieftains has become a reality, carried out 'to the glory of God' in the name of decency, to protect Christian principles, and to restore the honour of the old German virtues."*

As a result of this and other articles criticizing the Nazi Party, Van Paasen was eventually expelled from Germany and The Star was reprimanded.

Marriage Certificate

1932

State of New York,

SUPPOLK

County,

I Certify, That on the 3rd day of May
1932, at Riverhead in the County aforesaid
J. Robert Burnside, a Justice of the Peace, joined in Marriage,
John William Stephens of Easthampton
in the State of New York and Elizabeth Eleanor Voy Boag
of 82 Hallam Street, Toronto in the State of
Ontario, Canada

that the parties did then and there solemnly
declare that they took each other as Husband and Wife, according to the
Laws of the State of New York, and that there were present as witnesses,

Herbert F. Boag of TORONTO, Canada and

Jean C. Boag of Toronto, Canada

Dated at Riverhead this 3rd day of May

one thousand nine hundred and thirty-two.

WITNESSES:

Herbert F. Boag
Jean C. Boag

Robert Burnside

Justice of the Peace
of the Town of Riverhead, N.Y.

Hitler had moved quickly to consolidate his power. On March 23, as the deputies entered the Reichstag, they had to pass through a solid rank of Hitler's black-shirted bodyguards (S.S.) encircling the building (right). Inside, the corridors and walls were lined with Nazi brown-shirted storm troopers (S.A.), and they could see behind the Cabinet and the President, a huge swastika (the Nazi emblem) on a massive banner.



They were there to vote on The Enabling Bill which among other things gave the government 1) The power for four years to enact laws without the cooperation of the Reichstag. 2) The right to deviate from the Constitution and to conclude treaties with foreign states. Hitler said - *"We will only use these powers for carrying out vitally necessary measures....The government insists on the passing of the bill....The government offers to the parties of the Reichstag the opportunity for friendly cooperation, but it is prepared to go ahead in face of your refusal and of the hostilities which will result from that refusal....It is for you to decide between war and peace."*

When the leader of The Social Democrat Party said his party would not vote for the Bill, Hitler retook the platform in a rage and said - *"I do not want your votes. Germany will be free, but not through you. The star of Germany is in the ascendant, yours is about to disappear; your death knell has sounded."* The Bill passed on a vote of 441 to 94. Hitler was now in complete control of Germany.



In the spring of 1933, John returned to Long Island (with Voy and me) and worked at the beautiful Canoe Place Inn. The Inn, which grew from the Jeremiah Culver home built in 1750, was named for a portage where Indians used to leave their canoes. It later became a stagecoach stop and in 1892 the famous heavyweight boxer John L. Sullivan trained there for a championship fight. During Prohibition, when liquor could not be served legally, there was a "speakeasy" or illegal bar at the Inn. Famous guests who stayed at the Inn include actors Helen Hayes and Cary Grant, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Albert Einstein. The Inn closed as a resort in 1954 but still remains as a well-known musical entertainment venue.

There seems to have been mention of John working at the reception desk and bookkeeping, but I can't be certain. I have been told that the members of the band who played at the Inn would offer to baby sit me when my mother went for a swim. The group was Bing Crosby and the Rhythm Boys. Voy and young John returned alone, taking the long bus ride from Long Island to the Sunnyside Station in Toronto. In either 1932 or 1933, John was in car accident and had what a family member called a "broken back".

On their return from Long Island, Voy's sister Guelda, her husband, Bill Wyatt, and their 1½-year-old son, Warren, joined them at the Boag House. Bill, who had been at Eaton's in Hamilton, was looking for work in Toronto. For several years Voy and John lived there or with his parents, before they were able to afford to rent a house. During this time, Jean, Bill and John occasionally worked as "contingent" help at Simpson's Department Store for the grand sum of \$2.10 per day. It cost them seven cents each way, on the TTC, to go and pick up their wages. He also helped a friend deliver "bootleg" liquor in the evenings.

Pinky and Ralph had been living in Maw Stephens' upstairs flat, but they moved out so Voy and John moved in. John worked evenings at Leishman's Clothing Store at St. Clair and Dufferin and also as a waiter at the Toronto German Club, where he developed a dislike for its members, who seemed to him to be rude and uncultured. John, Bill and Jean's future husband Harold used to spend their spare time in Chuck Davey's "men only" pool hall on Bloor Street, which became their local community centre.



In October of 1933, John's father, John Shadrack (or Pa), went duck hunting on rice Lake where the family used to go to hunt and fish (John, left) north and east of Toronto. Apparently he fell into the cold water, where he remained overnight. After being rescued, he collapsed and was thought to be dead. To everyone's surprise, he woke up and walked out onto the porch. He said he was tired, and then he collapsed again and died.

So Maw was widowed for the second time, although by now she had nine children ranging in age from 22 to 45. One more heartbreak. In later years Maw would often talk about how worried she was about having to meet both husbands in Heaven, in that she loved them both and hoped that she wouldn't have to choose between them.



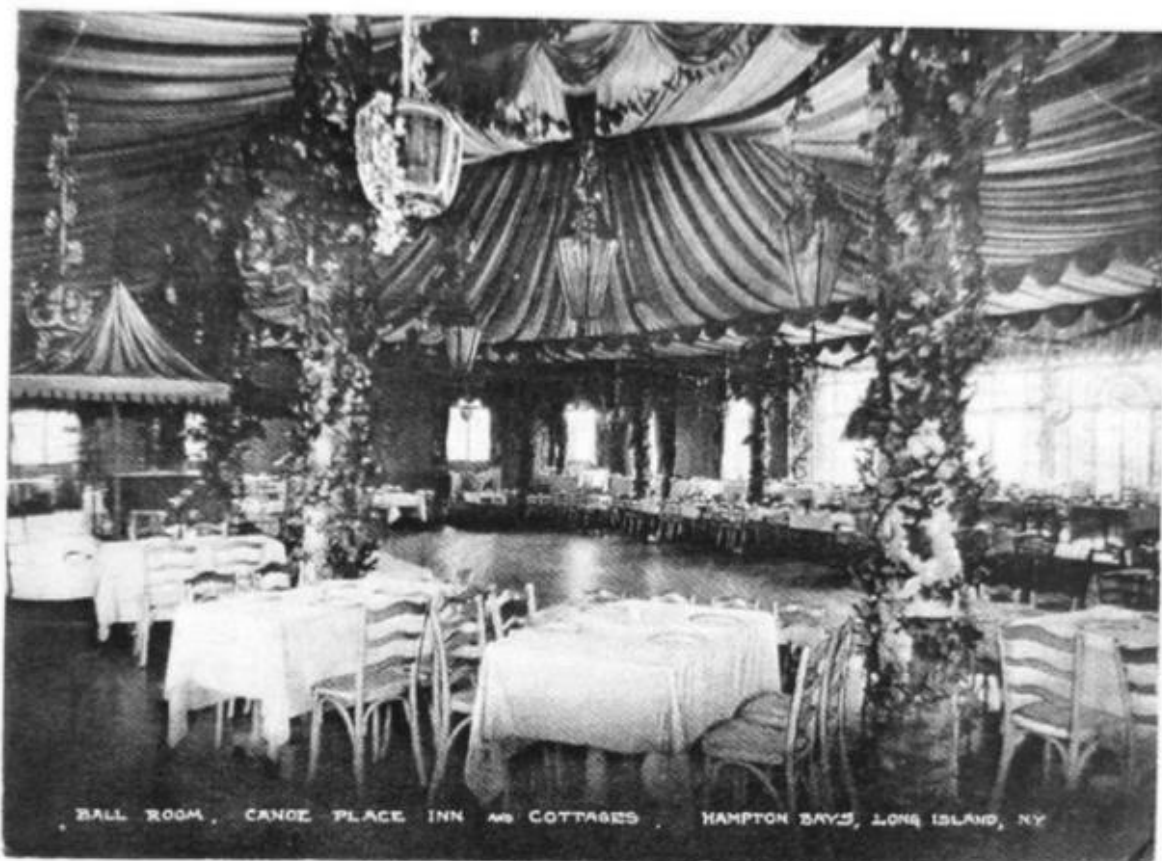
During the spring and summer of 1934, John again worked at the Canoe Place Inn (opposite), and where the writer is shown watering the plants (left). Later

he worked at the Southern Pines Golf Resort in North Carolina as a golf instructor and caddy master (right). This famous course by Donald Ross is one of North Carolina's excellent examples of the traditional design of golf course architecture.



In June 1934, Hitler began to sense some opposition from some senior members of the S.S. Corps and managed to convince himself that they were planning a coup against him. On June 30, as many as 400 people were executed by the Nazis; some were from the S.S., others were opposition politicians and some were people that the Nazis simply didn't like or feared.

After returning from the US in the fall of 1934, John was hired as a Men's Clothing salesman for Holt Renfrew and Company and because he was now working steadily, the family moved to a rented house on Holland Park Ave., a fair distance from their parents' homes. In September, 1935 he joined the T. Eaton Company Limited where he worked in the Men's Tailored-to-Measure Dept. in the Eaton' College Street Store.



BALL ROOM, CROCE PLACE INN AND COTTAGES, HAMPTON BAYS, LONG ISLAND, N.Y.



CROCE PLACE INN AND COTTAGES, HAMPTON BAYS, LONG ISLAND, N.Y.



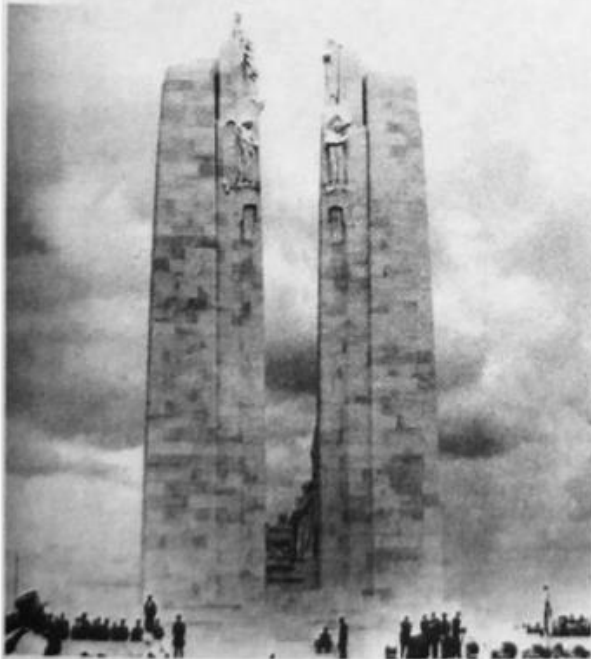
This is the text of a letter that Maw (left) wrote in 1936 to her niece Lizzie in Shropshire. *Dear folks. I guess you think I am pretty mean not writing but my heart has been so bad. I did not think much about anything. You will never know how disappointed I was I could not come to the Vimy Ridge affair, but the doctor would not allow me.* (She lived for twelve more years). *I guess I shall never come now. I hope you are all working dear- don't let your girls marry boys who are not working. Pinky has done that and now she still goes to work. So does Gert- some life. Things are bad here- 24,000 on relief. Doc has not done much for years but he is better in health. His girl (Lil) has just got married and she earned good money. I am sending a slip. Don't think anything of Doc – Ethel (Doc's wife- right) has not been in our house since Pa Stephens died three years ago and we have never had a word.*

Lizzie, take care of Lawson. Everyone thinks they should tell you what to do when you are alone. Johnny (my dad- her son) lives in 4 rooms here. I have a nine-room house I sometimes think I will sell if things get better. No wonder the Welsh boys are sore getting coal from Russia who threw us down during the war. Can you imagine people killing one another and they really don't know what they are fighting for. You will be thankful you have none to go. They are not going to allow Canadians to go they say. Poor boys- one woman has had three die in Christie (military) Hospital within three months, after all this time. Well give my love to all and yourself.



*Your loving Aunt
Harriet*

In 1936, Maw is still grappling with the affects of the depression and what it did to families and she seems convinced that there will be another war and Canada will not be in it. The "Vimy Ridge affair" refers to the official opening of the World War I Vimy Ridge Memorial on July 27, 1936 (below left).





6,000 Canadians assembled to honour Canada's 66,000 dead. Gregory Clark, the noted newspaper writer and WW I veteran, sets the scene - *"Hours before the ceremony began we were scattered far and wide, continuing the pathetic search for familiar scenes, veterans seeking the spot from which they jumped off, husbands trying to show wives where it really happened, mothers seeking the places their boys last felt the gift of life."*

Then the crowd assembled on the hills in front of the monument (opposite, right). The ceremonial party, including England's King Edward VIII and France's President, approached from the rear of the memorial. *"The bugles and trumpets screamed and then thundered out 'God Save the King' and the King was greeted with such a roar you never heard in war or peace."* Then the King walked into the crowd and spoke to veterans and relatives of the fallen. As he was talking to a mother (left) who lost five of her twelve sons in the war, he said, *"Please God, it shall never happen again."*

Then he walked up the steps and unveiled the memorial. *"With a sincerity wholly sublime, nothing that has been or can be said about the memorial does it justice. It is painfully beautiful. On its lonely hill, with no village or house within miles, it is sanctified by silence. It seems to rise out of the very hill itself, enchanting mystically toward it."*

One month later, Hitler proclaimed a Four-Year Plan and put Hermann Goring in charge. Now the German economy was subordinated to one purpose, preparation for war. War, the belief in violence, and the right of the stronger had become the essence of Nazism. Hitler and many Germans were in the process of creating an instrument of power with which to realize a policy of expansion and conquest that would admit no limitations. But the rest of the world was too slow to recognize it for what it was.

June 1937 - Canada's Prime Minister Mackenzie King concluded a trip to Germany with these words - *"I believe we have succeeded in promoting understanding, friendship and goodwill."*

July 10, 1937 - Voy and John had their second son, Edward Richard. Apparently the bedroom on Holland Park, which the two boys used, had no basement under it and the walls were icy in winter. The boys developed bronchitis so, in the spring, the family moved a few blocks north to a house on Clovelly Ave.

In September 1937, Hitler invited the Italian Fascist leader Benito Mussolini to Germany. The display of industrial might and military strength that was shown to him convinced Mussolini (who also wanted to expand his countries' territory) that he should join forces with Germany to help achieve a realignment of European countries. A short time later, Hitler met with Britain's Lord Halifax (right) and seems to have impressed him greatly.



On November 5, Hitler told his top military officers that the only solution to Germany's problems would be to obtain more living space (Lebensraum) in Eastern Europe, by taking over such countries as Austria and Czechoslovakia. "History has proved that expansion can only be carried out by breaking down resistance and taking risks." The trick would be to determine where Germany could achieve the greatest gain at the lowest cost. The choice of opponent would be based on Hitler's vast store of hatred, which he directed in his speeches at the Jews, Marxists, Czechs, Poles, and French etc.

Furthermore, rational discussion of foreign policy was virtually impossible, because most of his aides felt they were better off appealing to Hitler's insatiable vanity by agreeing with everything he said. He came to feel that he was fulfilling some kind of divine destiny. In 1937 he said, "However weak the individual may be when compared with the omnipotence and will of Providence, yet at the moment when he acts as Providence would have him act he becomes immeasurably strong. Then there streams down upon him that force which has marked all greatness in the world's history. When I look back on the last five years, then I feel: that has not been the work of man alone."

On September 29, Hitler and the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain signed a pact promising, "that our two peoples will never go to war with one another again".



In 1939, the family moved back to the old neighbourhood by renting a house at 858 Shaw Street and their third child, Barbara Nancy, was born there on March 14, 1939. It turned out that the house was built on an old dumpsite and it sagged in all directions. As long as they lived there, there were constant problems. Voy's dad, Frank Boag, used to say - "The kids will walk with one leg longer than the other, if they stay too long in that house."

On the day that Barbara was born, Hitler, using large doses of propaganda and even larger threats of an invasion, took over Czechoslovakia at the "request" of its President.

On August 22, 1939 Hitler told his generals - "The destruction of Poland has priority. The aim is to eliminate active forces, not to reach a definite line. Even if war breaks out in the West, the destruction of Poland remains the priority. I shall give a propagandist reason for starting the war. The victor will not be asked later whether he told the truth or not. It is not right that matters, but victory. Close your hearts to pity. Act brutally. Eighty million people must obtain what is their right. Their existence must be made secure. The strongest man is right." Despite a flurry of international negotiations, Poland was invaded on September 1, 1939.

WORLD WAR 2



HITLER ON DAY WAR STARTED

Sept. 10, 1939 - Canada declared war on Germany.

By June 1940, the Germans had overrun Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg and France and had driven the remaining French and British troops off the continent at Dunkirk, where they were evacuated by boat to Britain.

On July 23, John joined the 16th Field Ambulance, an Army Reserve Unit assisting the Home Defence Force with the defence effort in Canada. Because of his age (34) and his back injury, I think he assumed he would not be eligible to serve in the army but wanted to contribute in some way. He took St. John Ambulance "First Aid to the Injured" and "Home Nursing" courses and A.H. Squires signed one certificate (next page). In a real twist of fate Dr. Squires became my doctor almost 40 years later.

Rather than press the attack by invading Britain, Hitler signed Directive No. 21, on December 18, 1940, for 'Operation Barbarossa.' *"The German forces must be prepared to crush Soviet Russia in a quick campaign, even before the end of the war against England. Preparations are to be completed by May 15, 1941."*

One month later, on January 15, 1941, Voy and John had their fourth and last child, Kenneth William. The birth was a difficult and potentially dangerous one and it was decided to do a tubal ligation, so there would be no further pregnancies. In March 1941, John served on the jury deliberating in the case against William Newell, who was accused of murdering his wife. During the trial, Voy was admitted to hospital to have the procedure done. The trial was delayed at one time so that John could visit Voy in the hospital, accompanied by two guards. There were three trials, with the first two resulting in hung juries (including John's at ten for and two against) and the third in a conviction. Newell was hanged on February 12, 1942.

On June 3, John was inducted into the Regular Army. I believe the 16th F.A. was called into active service and John found himself at age 34, with a wife and four children, in the army. It wasn't quite like the famous picture (right) but it must have had some of the same feelings of loss on all sides. If that is the bad news, the good news is that he was immediately made Acting Sergeant.



DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION

I, John William Stephens do solemnly declare that the above particulars are true, and I hereby engage to serve in any Active Formation or Unit of The Canadian Army so long as an emergency, i.e., war, invasion, riot or insurrection, real or apprehended, exists, and for the period of demobilisation after said emergency ceases to exist, and in any event for a period of not less than one year, provided His Majesty should so require my services.

Date 2-1-41 John William Stephens
 WITNESSES A. H. Squires (Signature of witness)

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION

I, John William Stephens do sincerely promise and swear (or solemnly declare) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His Majesty.

John William Stephens (Signature of Recruit)

The Commandery in Canada
of
The Grand Priory in the British Realm
of the
Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem
The St. John Ambulance Association

Patron
HIS MAJESTY THE KING
SOVEREIGN HEAD AND PATRON OF
THE ORDER



FIELD MARSHAL H.R.H.
THE DUKE OF CORNAUGHT, K.G.
GRAND PRIOR OF THE ORDER

AMBULANCE DEPARTMENT
FOUNDED 1695 — INCORPORATED 1914

FOR INSTRUCTION IN FIRST AID, HOME NURSING, HOME HYGIENE AND SANITATION

This Certificate in
First Aid to the Injured

is awarded to

JOHN WILLIAM STEPHENS

*who has attended a course of instruction held under the auspices
of The Ontario Provincial Branch, at Toronto
and having been examined is found proficient in the said subject*
Melville C. Watson Lt. Col.

A. H. Quinn

DATE: January 26, 1941

*Issued by authority of
the Lieutenant and the
Director of Ambulance*

REGISTERED AT OTTAWA, CANADA, AND AT ST. JOHN'S GATE, CLARENCEWELL, LONDON, E.C.

All that week, the German Ambassador to Russia spent his time cabling Hitler, to try to convince him not to invade Russia – *"Russia will only fight if attacked by Germany. Stalin and Molotov are doing everything to avoid a conflict with Germany."* Hitler was unmoved.

John was posted to Camp Niagara but he spent a few months on courses in Ottawa and St. Hyacinthe.

The actual start of the Russian invasion was June 22, only 5 weeks behind Hitler's schedule. The decision to invade Russia would be Hitler's biggest blunder of the war, allowing Britain and her Allies to regroup, and spreading Germany's army too thin to be effective in any one direction.



June 24 – John, Ottawa - *"The course we are getting in two weeks is ordinarily a six week course."* Already the difficulty of living apart and communicating by mail was starting to show. July 18 – John – *"Speaking of heat, have you said anything to the landlord about the furnace or doing the repairs on the house."* July 24 – John, St. Hyacinthe, Quebec – *"Somehow your letter seemed constrained and not quite your usual writing self. Have you got something on your mind that is bothering you?"* August 4 – John – *"You tell me you have a surprise and then just dismiss it and leave me doing my best to figure out what it might be. Don't do that."* August 8 - John – *"Don't let things get you down my darling, as it will get worse before it gets better and time, as you have found out, only binds me tighter to you."* August 21 – John – *"It will sure be nice to see you all again even though it will be only for twenty four hours. I have a lot of steam of all kinds to get rid of."* John (left) is shown on leave with his family at 858 Shaw St. in Toronto at that time.

A German military directive on September 29 announced, *"The Fuhrer (Hitler) has decided to have St. Petersburg wiped off the face of the earth. The problem of the survival of the population and of supplying it with food is one which cannot and should not be solved by us."*

October 12, 1941 – John, Camp Debert, N.S. (right) – *"Arrived last night in a pouring rainstorm, dark as pitch and mud up to our necks. I think I parted with part of my body when we parted at the station. Thanks for being such a stout fellow about it. I don't think I could have stood it if you had cried. I know that everything is going to be all right for us from now on. Distance in being separated brings me closer to you."*



October 20 – John – *"Remember to be happy- you kids have to be cheerful and obedient and play together without fighting. Have you paid the lodge dues yet? It might be a good idea because it carries \$1000 insurance. I think that you feel that I have left forever. I think of it as going to work and returning when it is over.* October 25 - John – *"I think Eaton's is kicking in again this year at Christmas with 2 week's pay."* November 1 – John – *"My dreams every night are filled with dreams that are very disturbing and certainly hard on my laundry. You see what you do to me."* November 2– John – *"Hurry the days along so I can get rid of this extra energy that can only be expended in one way with one person. Does it bother you like that?"* Bob Godtel – *"I first met John at Camp Debert in November 1941, when he was a Sergeant with the 16th Field Ambulance."*

November 7 – John – *“John, your report at school is very good. Ted, do you still think you can lick me? Wait until I get home. Barbie, My little Pudgy Pal. Am I still your best boyfriend? Ken, Slumbering Sam are you walking yet?”* November 10 – John – *“Only about a month to go my pet until my next leave.”*

In one of the few instances we have to learn what she was going through, Voy wrote, on the back of John’s November 10th envelope, the words to a popular song of the day.

*When you’re alone who cares for starlit skies,
When you’re alone the magic moonlight dies.
At break of dawn there is no sunrise,
When your lover has gone.
What lonely hours the evening shadows bring,
When you’re alone with memories lingering like faded flowers.
Life can’t mean anything,
When your lover has gone.*



November 16 – John – *“Sorry to hear that Gord is not feeling well. He has a tough time of it.”* (Gord lived into his 90’s.) December 6 – John – *“By the time you get this you will know that my leave has been delayed as I am in the hospital with bronchitis and flu. I should be leaving here on Dec. 18, which will give us Christmas and New Years together. Do you think you could get off your mind what you have on it my love. I’m sure you would feel better, whatever it is. Apparently my phone call didn’t please you somehow. I can’t figure why. I think of you far more than you seem to think I do.”*

On December 7th 1941, Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbour and Hitler, in support of Japan, declared war on the USA.

January 22, 1942 – John, Debert - *“My confirmation is coming through this month for my Sergeant’s stripes.”* In fact it had been approved the day before. *“There is a possibility we will be converted into a Light Field Ambulance and need armoured training.”* (A Light F.A. would support an Armoured Division rather than the Infantry Division and would require a different organization and training.)

July 13 - John, Debert – *“I was in swimming for the first time this year and it was grand to be in the salt water again. I never realized how much I miss some of the things we used to do on Long Island. Don’t worry about me going overseas until you see me on my way.”*





July 16, 1942 - John had a 10-day leave to join his family at Voy's parent's cottage at Presquile Point near Brighton. In the picture (left), Ted, Barb and Voy's sister Jean by the car and Ken in his Gramma Boag's arms get ready to see him off. On his return to camp he wrote - *"It will be a long time before I forget the picture of you and the kiddies standing on that platform."* In fact, they would never see one another again. *"Thanks pet for giving me a wonderful time while I was home. I enjoyed every minute of it. And the picture of the last day and night is etched in my mind."*

By that day, Hitler's forces had come within 200 miles of Moscow, but were starting to bog down. There ensued a considerable difference of opinion between the German High Command and Hitler as to the next direction to take. Before matters were resolved, fall rains and winter set in and the German armies were stalled in their tracks.

August 20 - John qualified as a Motorcyclist, Class 3 and as a Driver-in-Charge of a Wheeled Vehicle, Class Three. I have seen pictures of him on a motorcycle when he served as a despatch rider in England. On September 25, the 16th Field Ambulance sailed from Halifax on the Athlone Castle. A few days before, John wrote - *"By the time you receive this you will have heard the news from Tommy Thompson, so you will know what the score is. You won't be getting any mail for a while. I will get in touch with you just as soon as I can. Keep smiling darling and keep remembering that I love you very much and always will."*



THE UNION-CASTLE ROYAL MAIL MOTOR VESSEL "ATHLONE CASTLE" 25,567 TONS

They arrived in Liverpool on October 8, 1942. *"Had a marvellous crossing. The only thing wrong was that you weren't there to enjoy it with me. Give my love to the bairns and tell them I am going to have stories galore to tell them when I get home."* October 19 - John - *"I am going on leave and taking Bud Shuter up to my cousin's with me."* "Up" is Wednesbury and his "cousin" is Lizzie Smith.

ELIZABETH ANN WILLIAMS (LIZZIE) SMITH



You may recall that I said Harriet's niece Lizzie was orphaned at a fairly early age. I now know from the 1901 census that Eliza (age 44) and Lizzie (11) were living in Wednesbury at the rear of 7 Wellcroft Street, but there was no mention of Eliza's other daughter Mary Jane (Jenny - 17). We can assume she was employed and living outside the home. Eliza's occupation is shown as Charwoman. I also discovered that she died in the first three months of 1911, leaving Lizzie an orphan at age 20. One of her daughters says Lizzie moved to Marton after her mother died, and that her father used to ride his bicycle from Wednesbury to Marton on weekends to court her. It seems that the only person from her family who might still have been in Marton in 1911 was her Aunt Mary, and, as we have said before, I don't know what happened to her. Nevertheless, Lizzie seems to have kept contact with the Madeley side of the family, because in later years she lived in their family homestead at 18 Rooth Street, Wednesbury until her death.

She married Lawson Smith (previous page) and they had four children, Doreen, Evelyn, Gerald and Betty. Lizzie became the contact for all her Canadian relatives during World Wars I and II, opening her household to all her cousins and their friends. When John was killed, it was Lizzie who held a memorial service for him at her church and wrote to my mother for years. It was those letters that gave me the first clues about our family history and helped me to develop the information for this story.



A few years ago I visited Rooth Street with Lizzie's daughter Evelyn and had my picture taken with her (and her husband Morris) in the back yard just as my father had with her more than 55 years earlier. When we arrived at the house, no one was



home. As we were walking away, the owner drove up. When he heard why we wanted to use his backyard, he was delighted to oblige. In addition, Evelyn had a chance to see some of the changes made to the house since she had lived there. Just a few minutes sooner and we would have been disappointed.

November 3 – John - *“Lizzie is so uncannily like Gert in appearance and actions it gave me an odd feeling every time she talked to me. They are all nice people and couldn't do enough for us. War news reads a little better these days. Should be over soon.”* November 13 – John - *“With Christmas rolling along pet, it makes me feel a little blue, as this one will be the first away from you since we were married.”* January 10, 1943 – John - *“I am all in a dither, as I only have a little over a day before I see the Selection Board in London about the Officer Candidate Training.”*

There had been some suggestion of reorganizing the R.C.A.M.C., but a decision was made on January 11, 1943 that the British model would be followed. One feature of this organization of interest to our story was that Non-Medical personnel in the Canadian forces would now be used as Stretcher Bearer Officers. This would require identifying and training suitable candidates.

January 20 - John - *“I received word yesterday that my application for Officer's Training was approved by the selection board. The next step is to attend the Pre Officer Cadet Training Unit to see if I am smart enough and then OCTU. In all, it will take about four to six months. The 16th Light Field Ambulance is now going to be reorganized and become the 7th Canadian Field Dressing Station.”*

The first course, conducted by Canadian military personnel and consisting of basic academics, physical training and military discipline, took place at Blackdown Barracks and lasted three weeks.

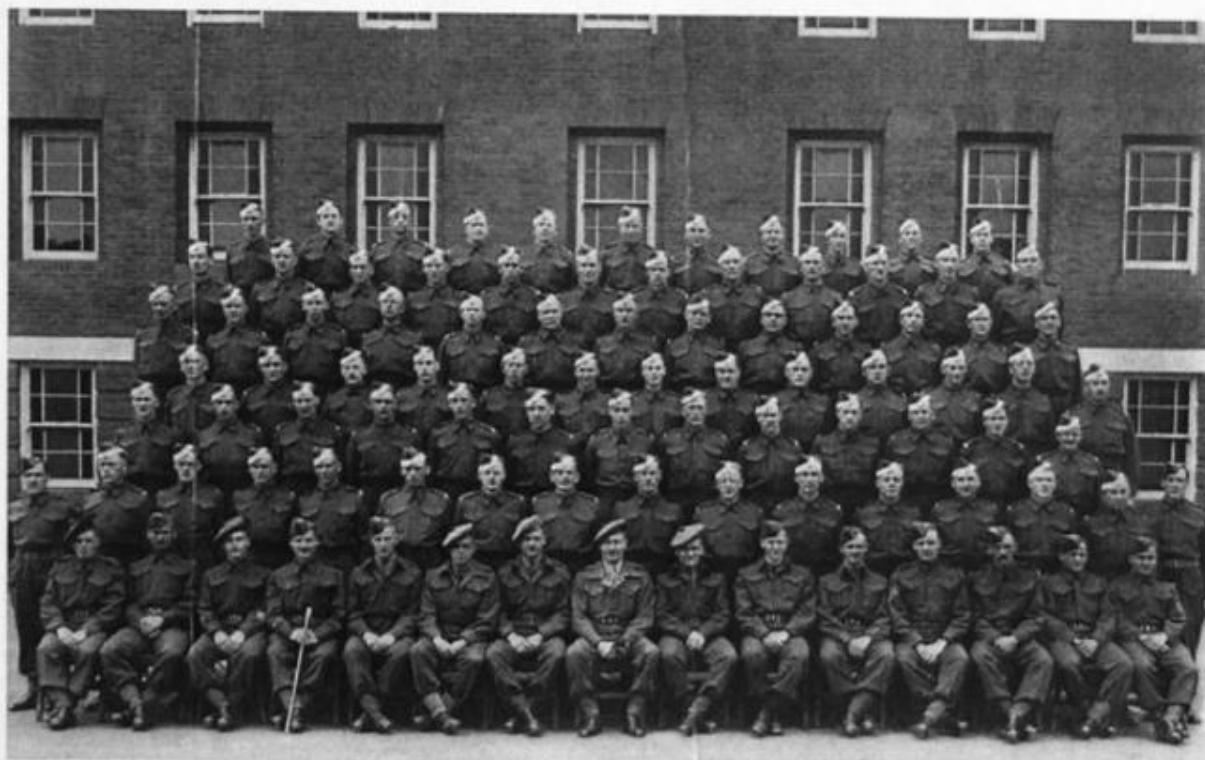


Towards the end of January, General Paulus reported to Hitler that the suffering of the Sixth Army troops at Stalingrad, through cold, hunger and epidemics, was no longer bearable and that to continue fighting in such conditions was beyond human strength. Hitler replied – *“Capitulation is impossible. The Sixth Army will do its historic duty at Stalingrad until the last man”*. On January 31, the Russians announced that they had completed the capture or annihilation of the Sixth Army and the Fourth Panzer Army.

March 23 - John – *“It makes me feel proud when people write and tell me what a good job you are doing. It makes me feel what I am doing is worthwhile and I will spend the rest of my life proving to you how much I appreciate it. We will have many years ahead to make up for this lost time and we will make them all happy ones.”*

After a brief assignment in a Holding Unit and some leave, - *“I was up to Ma’s birthplace in Wales (Marton) for a day and I know you would have loved it. It is just a little village nestled in a valley and, if ever peace existed, it was there”*- the OCTU course started at Camp Borden on April 17 – *“I feel much more confident than I did going into the first course”* and lasted for six weeks.

April 25 – John, OCTU - *“This is the end of the first week of the course and it has been a busy one. We averaged four hours sleep for the first four days. Don’t be upset darling if you don’t get much mail during the course. This is the final step and I must bear down to get through.”* The lack or lateness of mail prompted frequent comments to one another and created tension and misunderstanding on both sides. *“I received two parcels mailed in February this week.”* Parcels were especially bad. *“We had pictures taken of the class. I will send you one as soon as I get it.”* John is second from the right in the fifth row.



May 3 - John - *"This is our anniversary, love, and, looking back over the years in my mind, I wouldn't trade them for all the money in the world. If I had it to do all over again, I would want to do the same thing. You have been a real wife and I'm a fortunate man to have you and the children and certainly am proud to be your husband and their father. Keep remembering that I love you and always will."*

The house on Shaw Street was an ongoing problem and was often mentioned in correspondence. It sagged everywhere, the heating system was totally inadequate and the landlord was reluctant to spend money. John wrote - *"I hope you don't have to move, darling, but still it might be for the best."* - even though he could do little to help.

On May 7, the Allies captured Tunis and Bizerta and within a week the entire Axis force in Africa, which Hitler had built up to over 250,000 men, were taken prisoner, with all their equipment. In less than six months, Stalingrad and Tunisia had cost the Axis the loss of well over half a million men.

May 24, 1943 - John - *"I am happy to say darling that you will be addressing my mail now to LIEUTENANT Stephens. I signed my papers Sat. A.M. and we will be having our graduation on May 27, when we will receive our commissions from General McNaughton. I have worked hard and the thought that you and the nippers were rooting for me kept me going all the harder."*

He had less than 2 months to live.

June 6 - John - *"I am looking forward to my first posting as an officer with a little trepidation, however we are supposed to be the cream of the crop for this new job - Stretcher Bearer Officer. I would like to make a good impression."* Although John never mentioned this in any correspondence that I have seen, Sergeant-Major Tom Stephens (an old army buddy) told Voy that John had topped his class and was posted to the Canadian First Division because it had top priority. Bob Godtel says that, when six of the new officers were posted to the First Division, they were given the unusual chance to choose which of the three Field Ambulance units they wanted to join and which other officer they wanted to serve with. John and Bob chose the Fifth.

June 9 - John - *"I received your air-letter of May 25 today, but I don't like the sound of you being ill. I hope you are better before this gets to you. You didn't say what was wrong."* Voy never enjoyed good health and, with the stress of the responsibility for looking after four young children (by this time I was the eldest at 10), was often plagued with migraine headaches and other ills. Of course, John was in no position to help. *"I am in a new spot now (probably Scotland) and we are under canvas again. I like it very much except when it rains, which it has for the last four days, and everything is damp. I have a nice portable bed and bedroll, so I am off the ground and quite comfortable. This being an officer certainly has some advantages. A huge flight of bombers going over to visit Fritzie (the Germans) just went by. He won't be happy, I'm afraid. Love and kisses to the bairns and all my love to you."*

June 15 - John, Fifth Field Ambulance - *"I am now with a unit officially."*

OPERATION HUSKY THE SICILIAN CAMPAIGN

The material about Sicily has been assembled from letters from John to Voy, a letter from Captain Ian Maclean M.D. (who was John's immediate C. O.), letters from others who served with John and excerpts from the War Diaries of the Fifth Field Ambulance, "A City Goes To War" (History of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment), "The Seaforth Highlanders", "The Canadian Medical Services 1939-1945 Vol. 1.", The Toronto Daily Star and "And No Birds Sang" by Farley Mowat.

At a military conference in Casablanca in January 1943, it was decided to invade the island of Sicily. It was not until early May that a final plan was drawn up and approved by Allied Commander-in-chief, Dwight Eisenhower. The U.S. Seventh Army would attack the south central shore and the British Eighth Army the southeast corner of the island, with the aim of trapping the Italian and German forces or driving them off the island to Italy. Included in the British Eighth Army would be the First Canadian Infantry Division and a British Special Service Brigade, containing Nos. 40 and 51 Royal Marine Commandos.

"The First and Second Canadian Infantry Brigades of the First Canadian Infantry Division were to attack side by side over a sandy stretch of beach extending some five miles along the south western side of the Pachino peninsula, from a point about two miles from its southernmost tip, destroy the coast artillery and beach defences, clear the high ground overlooking the beaches, and capture the Pachino airfield. The Royal Marine Commandos were to seize the beaches and hinterland on the immediate left flank and to put out of action several coastal defence batteries". The Navy would be responsible for all casualties afloat, the Army for those occurring ashore. Evacuation from shore to ship was to be a naval responsibility, but it was expressly stated – *"The evacuation of wounded must not be allowed to interfere with the landing of assault troops, vehicles and reinforcements."*

Regimental medical officers were to land with their battalion headquarters and regimental stretcher bearers (John) with their respective companies. Field ambulances were to be under brigade command; the 4th and 5th with the assault brigades and 9th with the reserve brigade. One field ambulance section would land immediately behind each battalion; unit headquarters and the remaining section with brigade headquarters. The two field ambulances with the assault brigades were each to establish one or more beach dressing stations and, further inland, an advanced dressing station.

There was a further refinement contained in the following orders of the Royal Marines, which were sent to me in 1976 by Major General T.B.L. Churchill, under the heading "Medical" - *"40 and 41 Commandos will establish a beach dressing station and all casualties will be evacuated to this station. A detachment of one officer and eighteen other ranks of Fifth Canadian Field Ambulance will make contact with the beach dressing station as soon as possible after they land. As soon as this contact has been made, all casualties will be evacuated from the beach dressing station by the Field Ambulance."*

It was obvious to Hitler and Mussolini that, after the defeat and capture of the Axis forces in Africa, the Allies would want to land now on the north shores of the Mediterranean - but where? Hitler favoured Sardinia and Mussolini, Sicily. A British Intelligence plot may have "set up" Hitler. A body, dressed as an officer-courier, was set adrift from a submarine off the coast of neutral Spain, carrying an official briefcase attached to its wrist. Inside the briefcase was a letter instructing the British command to fake an attack on Sicily and land on Sardinia and in Greece. Three days later the body was delivered to the British Naval Attaché in Spain, along with evidence that the letter had been read.

The Axis powers had to spread out their remaining forces to cover these and other possibilities, but to Hitler there was also the question of whether the Italians could be relied on to fight. Although he had never been in Sicily before, a retired 66-year-old General, d'Armata Guzzoni, was made Italian Commander and set about to strengthen his command. He soon discovered that his 200,000 man force was poorly trained, had few anti-tank and anti-naval guns and ammunition, were without adequate supply lines from Italy, and were protected in a very limited way from a potential naval assault landing and lacked effective air support.

Waffen (armed) SS units were not actually part of the German Army but members of an organization, which had been created originally as Hitler's private bodyguard. Out of this organization, Hitler and his aide Himmler created groups to oversee the "*strengthening of the German economy*" (slave labour) and the "*final solution to the Jewish problem*" (death camps) against those people who were considered "*inferior beings and sub-human species*". Then, because they were never sure that they could count on allegiance from the German army, they expanded the Waffen SS to an army of thirty-five divisions with 500,000 men, directly under Hitler's control. They got preference over the regular army for manpower and equipment.



The Waffen Fifteenth Panzer (Armoured Artillery and Tank) Division was part of Hitler's Afrika Korps, which had been defeated and captured in North Africa. They were included among the 250,000 German troops who surrendered in mid-May, 1943 in Africa. This unit was recreated and linked with an infantry unit to become the Waffen Fifteenth Panzer Grenadier Division (see Pak armoured car - left) under Maj.-Gen. Eberhardt Rodt



(see officer's uniform - right) and was now located in the western portion of Sicily.

There were three German divisions in Italy and two more in Sicily. All Hitler and Mussolini could do was wait for the Allied attack.



John and Bob reported for duty at the Divisional Headquarters in Hamilton, south of Glasgow, Scotland, on June 16, 1943. When they reached their unit, they found most of it had been on board ships on the Clyde River, off the west coast of Scotland, for days. Bob was assigned to "A" Company and John to "B" Company. After drawing tropical clothing (left) and other gear, they were sent by landing craft to their ship. War Diary, Fifth F.A. - "*Godtel, Bailey, Middleton and Stephens to Durban Castle* (right)." The next day - "*Lieut. Stephens was assigned to the Llangibby*

Castle, to command the 6th section of 'B' Company." Regardless of what the War Diary says, Major Ian Maclean, who became John's immediate superior, says he sailed with him on the Durban Castle. The Royal Marines were also on that ship.



John and Bob had missed the unit's combined operations training in May. Field Ambulance personnel had practiced the loading of stretcher cases on landing craft, the landing and employment of stretcher-bearer sections in support of infantry battalions, and the carrying of casualties over long distances and hilly country. Meanwhile the assault troops were practicing beach landings and mountain warfare. The brigade exercise that concluded the week's training had given each field ambulance an opportunity to test its arrangements for handling casualties during an assault on enemy-held beaches.

June 22 – Edmontons – *“Every evening there was entertainment aboard, but nearly all the men wrote letters, for they well knew their loved ones might have cause to cherish them.”*

June 25 – John - *“Every day darling, I bless the fact that you are you and when this darn war is over, I will come home to a sane existence again and know that time has not separated us in any way.”*



During the latter part of June, they were convoyed ashore for two different route marches and the whole Division took part in a practice assault landing. After two weeks living aboard ship, their part of the convoy sailed on June 30th, - 8 ½ months after John's arrival in England. Thirteen RCAMC units, with a combined strength of 305 officers and 1484 other ranks embarked for *“Operation Husky”*.

On July 1, the troops were informed of their destination. *“There was a message from Gen. Montgomery; it sent a thrill through everyone for it was a welcome to the Eighth Army, that famous Commonwealth formation that had borne the burden of three years of war in North Africa. ‘I know well the Canadian fighting men. They are magnificent soldiers and the long and careful training they have received in England will be put to good use’.”*

Much time was spent on briefing for the forthcoming operation. The Canadian Medical Services said - *“The normal routine of life aboard a troopship (boat drills, meals, sleep, inspections), coupled with physical training, deck games and lectures, occupied the remaining time. Great stress was laid on keeping the troops in the best possible physical condition. A considerable time was devoted to a course by medical*

officers on the prevention of tropical diseases to be found in Sicily, especially malaria.” Capt. Maclean later wrote - *“‘Stevie’ led our men in their physical training. He always kept pictures of you and the children above his bunk.”*



ON THE LONG SEA VOYAGE to Sicily and battle, Canadian troops aboard ship maintained their training schedule until the final moment before landing. As the ship approaches Sicily, these men who proved themselves “terrible” in the landing operations, listen to a lecture on enemy weapons.

July? – John - *“On the boat” - “Dear Kiddies, I think of you every day and take your pictures out and look them over and think what a lucky man I am to have four such nice children. I will have lots of exciting stories to tell you when I come home, of all the places I have seen. Love, Dad. It has been lovely and sunshiny and I am getting a nice tan. Everything is running along smoothly and, if it weren't for our escort, this would appear like a pleasure cruise.”* The “escort” consisted of endless naval warships and constant flights of friendly aircraft overhead, watching for enemy submarines.

“We dine at seven with glistening silver and nice white linen.” Part of the reason for this was that the Durban Castle was a passenger liner, which had been converted to a troopship. Their part of the convoy was threatened with a submarine attack off Gibraltar and escaped without harm. Four of the slower ships, which had left two weeks earlier, were torpedoed and sunk. Some of these ships carried medical supplies and vehicles, especially for the Ninth F.A. However - *“Two vehicles from the Fifth F.A., together with the equipment they carried, were sunk with the St. Essylt.”*

“We will be in action soon. I don't want you to worry about it pet, as I will be perfectly safe and only too glad to be doing something to hurry this crazy business along to a quick conclusion. There are so many things you used to do that are very vivid in my mind and I often close my eyes and look back on those pleasant thoughts and memories and know those were very happy hours we spent together.” Edmontons - *“Letters home dealt with simple homey things, such as comes to a man's mind when he realises that he may not see his folks again.”*

July? – John - *“on boat” - “I wanted to get one more letter to you as mail will be scarce for a while now. Zero Day is approaching and we are all set for it. You can depend on it love that we will give a good account of ourselves. Don't worry love, will you. I will be ok and have every assurance that I will continue to be. Always keep in mind that my greatest aim in life right now is to get this over with and get home to you. Somehow I feel quite detached from all this. Physically I am all here but nothing ruffles me very much and I seem to get things done much better. My thoughts are with you always. I often sit down and conjecture what you might be doing and all the little trials and tribulations of the children. The ocean is a little choppy right now but, on the whole, it has been a very pleasant trip. My whereabouts are security so, if you even surmise, don't discuss it with anyone for a while anyway. Although, by the time this reaches you, the world will have had some exciting news. Keep smiling and remembering all my love to you.”*

July? – John - *“In the East” - “I spent some time in the north of Scotland where we were based waiting to sail. I found it quite nice but didn't see much of it, as I came directly from the train to the boat. I share a cabin on this nice boat with three of our unit officers and we are very comfortable. Our meals are excellent and served in the well-known English style. This being an officer has its points where comfort is concerned. It is so hot it is necessary to sleep in the raw and it seems a long time ago since I have done that.”* (Enlisted men were given permission to sleep on deck.)

“We passed some land last night and it was the shoreline of Africa. Our convoy is well protected and several subs are sorry they attempted to interfere. Our score, 3 – 0. You will hear about our reason for being here before this reaches you. Please don't worry about it, love, as I will be quite safe. I'm glad this time has come, because it means that I will get home to you that much sooner. Love to all, with all my love to you.”

This is the last letter I have seen and may indeed be the last one he wrote.

LANDING IN SICILY

The Canadian Medical Services (C.M.S.) - *"On the morning of July 9, 1943, the fast assault convoy met that part of the slow convoy required for the initial attack off the southern coast of Malta, then headed northward towards Sicilian waters to some six or seven miles offshore, from where the troops would set out in landing craft for their allotted beaches. (Daily Star reported that there were 3000 ships employed in the assault.) As the day wore on a stiff gale blew up and threatened to make a sea-borne landing impossible, but fortunately it abated somewhat by nightfall."* Edmontons - *"As soon as night fell, there was almost continuous air and naval bombardments against Sicilian targets."*

Royal Marines. Colonel Churchill - *"The night was not very dark, as there was a bright moon near the full. I could see the dark loom of the ship, the brilliantly clear stars, and the Milky Way like a great white road in the sky."*

Seaforths - *"It was hot in the bowels of the ship as the men waited to board their landing craft. There was some talk but not too much. Every reaction of which man is capable could have been found as they waited; excitement over the prospect of attack; fear as to how he would measure up to the demands of battle; tension as to whether the enemy were ready and waiting, etc. It all seemed unreal, a feeling intensified by the now silent ship, the dimmed lights and the unusually subdued voices."*

C.M.S. - *"Although seas were still running high when the Canadian convoy dropped anchor at the release point shortly after midnight, the leading waves of assault craft got away mostly on schedule (the assault was scheduled for 0245 hours) and with less difficulty than had been anticipated."*

Imagine what it must be like to climb over the side of a ship in the dark, scramble down a net to jump into a bobbing landing craft, be jammed into this small boat for several hours and have to ride 7 or 8 miles in rough seas. All the while your ears are bombarded by the noisy engine, yours eyes are looking at bombs and artillery exploding on land and planes roaring overhead lit up by ack-ack fire, you are fighting seasickness and are fast approaching who knows what kind of hell ashore.



SWARMS OF PLANES of every type in the Allied Mediterranean theater escorted the invading army from the air. Armed with four cannon and carrying 1,000 pounds of bombs, the new Typhoon fighter-bomber helped give Sicily days of "Pantelleria treatment."



Royal Marines - *"The Twenty-two assault craft carrying the two Commando Units headed for a coast they could not yet see."*

The picture (left) shows how it looks today. The Marines landed at the hilly section in the centre rear.

“There was a strong swell running and waves were soon splashing over the bows of the craft, drenching their occupants. We landed a half hour late, somewhat off target and under fire. By 0500 hours the defences had been overrun and we had discovered what were thought to have been coastal defence guns were machine gun posts. About fifty of the enemy were killed and approximately 100 prisoners taken.

The adverse weather conditions had a favourable influence on the landings, because they threw the Italian coastal garrisons momentarily off guard.”



CLEARING THE WAY for the troops were invasion-trained Royal Navy marines in their leaping speedboats. The attack on Axis Europe came just eight months after Allied forces first landed in North Africa.

They had also been counting on a string of barbed wire, mines and the sandbars or false beaches to make landing difficult or impossible. Engineers in the lead boats make quick work of the wire and mines; other methods, such as rerouting or jumping off and pushing, took care of the sandbars. *“Although the First Brigade was late in getting ashore, and not all units landed where they were supposed to, the first Canadian objectives were captured before seven a.m. Only in the area assaulted by the Royal Marines did the enemy react strongly. There a Blackshirt unit put in a spirited counter-attack that threatened to penetrate to the beaches. A heavy concentration of Canadian mortar fire quickly turned the tide.”*

Seaforths – *“The assault companies dug out several hundred prisoners whose appetite for battle had faded very rapidly. They were a sorry looking lot as they were dispatched to compounds set up on the beach area, now teeming with men, vehicles, and supplies.”*



The assault sections of the Fourth and Fifth F.A. landed between 6:00 and 7:30 A.M. and, with few casualties on the beach, moved inland behind the infantry. As arranged, the Fifth promptly made contact with Royal Marines and dispatched a section to care for its wounded.

War Diary, Fifth Field

Ambulance – July 10th – *“Lieutenant Stephens and his section were sent from ‘B’ Company to evacuate wounded directly to the hospital carrier, St. David, anchored off the coast.”* (So it was John’s section that supported the Commandos.) *“Sutherland visited the Regimental Aid Post of the Commandos and found 23 cases, some of which were serious abdominal and compound fracture wounds.”* According to the C.M.S. - *“The Royal Marines lost 9 killed and 32 wounded.”*

35 years later, I learned that one of the wounded commandos had been Lieut. Charlie MacRae, who was then my boss in Simpsons Toronto Downtown Store. He happened to mention to me one day that damp weather bothered his knee, which he had broken in a fall during the Sicilian assault. What a coincidence! He later rose to the position of Company President. Edmontons – *“Against little opposition, Eighth Army had landed 80,000 men, 900 guns and 1,000 vehicles on its chosen timetable.”*

July 10 – Berlin broadcasts reported very heavy fighting in Sicily and claimed heavy losses among the invading troops. They said that coastal batteries and defence aircraft had mowed down the troops and numerous barges laden with men and materials were sunk. *“Axis forces are decisively countering the attack.”* In fact Allied naval guns had silenced any sign of artillery resistance and perimeter defence forces seemed to melt away or surrender. Major breakdowns in the Axis communications system, which had been sabotaged by Allied paratroopers, made organizing counter-attacks very difficult and resulted in uncoordinated local responses. The Fifteenth Panzer Grenadiers with Tiger tanks (right) were recalled to the centre of the Island.



July 10 - Daily Star, Moscow – *“Russia, seizing the initiative after halting German Panzers in a gigantic tank battle, has wiped out Nazi wedges in its lines near Belgorod and driven them back. One Russian tank group was credited with destroying 80 tanks, 200 trucks and 2,000 soldiers in one day.”*

July 11 - Edmontons – *“Orders arrived for an advance on Ispica, a small market town seven miles north. It stood on a pinnacle above the coastal plain and, because of its precipitous approaches, it might have been a tough nut to crack. But, as the Edmontons approached, its small garrison surrendered without any resistance. The civil population acclaimed the Canadians as liberators.”*

German and Italian counter-attacks against the Americans at Gela were repulsed by land and naval fire and they withdrew to Caltigaronne. The debate started as to whether Sicily could be defended and, if so, how.

July 12 - War Diary, Fifth F.A. – *“With exception of ‘B’ Company, Fifth F.A. continued to support the Second Brigade and established an advanced dressing station at Ispica.”* Then they fell into a routine of leapfrogging the Fourth F.A., as the infantry moved north. Daily Star – *“General Eisenhower, after landing in Sicily, was told, that in the early stages of the operation, four Italian Lieutenant-Colonels walked up and surrendered, explaining that the reason they were ‘caught’ was they were making ‘personal front-line reconnaissance’.”*

Edmontons – Lieut. J. Snell – *“The tank that had joined us at Modica fired three shots and the town surrendered. The Corps Commander made me Town Major. I had fifteen men, so you can imagine the work - 70,000 excitable Italians with no food - trying to get order out of chaos.”* Seaforths - *“The Seaforth Highlanders continued their move north, with a hard, grinding, march in a cloud of dust, which made a white layer of dust over every man. They had covered thirty miles in twenty-four hours.”*



Hitler ordered the First Paratrooper Division to start moving down from France and the Twenty-ninth Panzer Grenadiers to move to the south of Italy, across from Sicily, to be available, if needed.

On July 13, the Division took a day and one half to rest and prepare for the next advance, so casualties were low. At this point, no unit in the Canadian Division had met up with enemy tanks, no serious counter-attack had been launched, and no strong body of German troops had been encountered. Prisoners had come steaming in from all directions.

July 13 – Marines – *“On the third day after landing, we were withdrawn to the beach for a rest.”*

July 14 – C.M.S. – *“The Canadian advance was resumed on the night of July 14-15.”*

It was decided to move all Italian and German troops to the northeast of the island, to take up positions to defend the island or allow for an orderly withdrawal to the mainland of Italy. A senior Italian officer advised Mussolini that Italy should withdraw from the war and make peace with the Allies.

July 15 – War Diary, Fifth F.A. – *“B’ Company rejoined the unit at Monterosso Almo, in a large municipal building (right).”*

This picture was taken by me in 1997 and shows the municipal building at the right and my son John in the green shirt and jeans talking to our taxi driver. The paving stones in the square (as in many other Sicilian villages) are made from lava from Mount Etna.



Seaforths – *“For the next few days, Seaforths and other infantry units, pushed north to Valguarnera. It was an uphill-downhill route of sixty miles, along dusty roads and in intense heat. Occasionally some troops hitched a ride, but for the most part it meant steady marching in sub-tropical heat, which seemed to dry out one’s bones.”*

July 16 – Having had a few days to fall back to more defensible positions, German and Italian resistance stiffened and began to present a much bigger challenge.

July 17 – C.M.S. – *“The day before, there had been a brisk encounter with German troops at Grammichele and Caltigarone. The leading troops (Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry-“Patricias”) had now captured Piazza Armerina but began to encounter much stiffer German resistance north of the town. It would seem that the Italians still were unwilling to provide much opposition and the Germans were offering whatever resistance there was.”* Edmontons – *“Field Marshall Alexander ordered the Canadians to advance on Valguarnera and Leonforte, then eastward towards Mt. Etna, to attack the flanks and rear of enemy forces fighting the British on the east coast. From Piazza Armerina to Leonforte was a distance of 20 mountainous miles.*

War Diary, Fifth F.A. – *“The Fifth F.A. set up south of Piazza Armerina.”*

July 17 – Field Marshall Albert Kesselring, commander-in-chief of the German armies in southern Europe, radioed his daily situation report to Berlin – *“and near Valguarnera troops trained in mountain fighting have been encountered. Our forces have successfully disengaged from action with them.”*

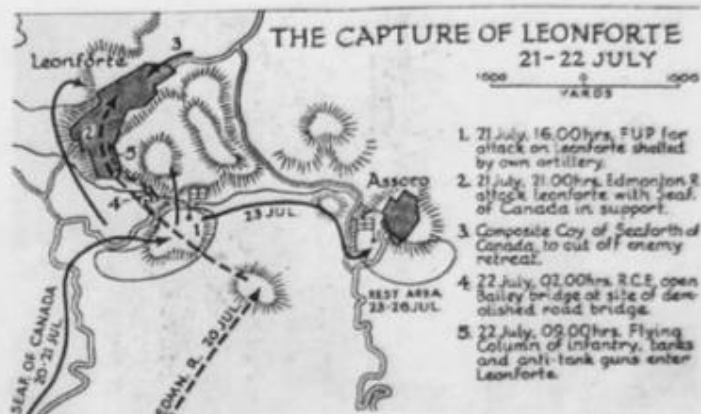
The troops referred to were the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment “Hasty Pees” from Eastern Ontario. It seems to me that, in this instance, “disengaged” really meant, “retreated”.

July 18 – C.M.S. – “About noon, the day of the worst fighting yet, Fifth F.A. shifted its advanced dressing station to a point less than three miles from the bitterly disputed road junction to the south-west of Valguarnera.” Seaforths – “The Seaforths moved north over the twisting roads to Valguarnera. In the early hours of the next morning, they entered Valguarnera, passing abandoned German vehicles and guns and some dead, both Germans and Canadians, in the ditches.”

July 19, 1943 – Hitler and Mussolini met to discuss the course of the war. Hitler insisted that the war must continue to be fought on all fronts – “If anyone tells me that our tasks can be left to another generation, I reply that this is not the case. Germany took thirty years to recover from the first war; Rome never rose again. This is the voice of History.”

THE BATTLE FOR LEONFORTE

July 19 – Seaforths – “A few miles north of Valguarnera a wide saucer-like valley opened up and German forces fired on the Seaforths from the ridge, with heavy machine-guns, mortars and artillery. Without the support of mortars and artillery, which had been delayed waiting for a blown bridge to be repaired, the unit sustained heavy casualties.” Their Padre wrote – “Into this valley or gully we went on foot. Wounded were being brought out and I attended the dying; boys I had known well were among the victims, torn and bleeding beyond all hope of recovery. In the not-too-distant hills, we could hear the enemy’s guns fire and we could count the seconds before the shell landed in our gully. By noon the worst was over, when the infantry was joined by the mortars and anti-tank guns.”



C.M.S. – “With the leading infantry now engaged in levering the enemy from positions covering the road running northwards from Valguarnera towards Leonforte, Fourth F.A. and First Field Dressing Station, with First Field Surgical Unit attached, opened conjointly an advanced dressing station and advanced surgical centre in Valguarnera. The building they occupied was a large school that had been in use as an Italian hospital. It contained large stocks of medical supplies, including surgical instruments and dressings. Also inherited were some sixty enemy patients, civilian and military, whose condition, along with that of the building, was recorded as ‘indescribable’.”

July 20 – Edmonton – “At dawn the Edmonton crossed the dry Dittaino riverbed and immediately came under distant machine gun fire, then occupied a holding position and stood fast throughout the day.” C.M.S. “It was decided to change the tactical employment of field ambulance companies in immediate support of brigades. Each section had thus far tended to follow immediately behind the battalion to which it was affiliated. It was directed that in future the three sections would function as a company, establish one casualty collection post in the vicinity of brigade headquarters, and, from this point, send personnel and vehicles forward to evacuate casualties from regimental aid posts as required. A steady stream of casualties flowed into the forward medical installations from July 20 to the 24. During these five days there were 140 Canadians killed and 395 wounded.”



FIGURE 10: AT THE FRONT

July 21 – As the day dawned, John may have taken a moment to think over the last 10 horrifying days he had spent in Sicily, the nine and one half hectic months since he had arrived in England, and the one week short of a year since he had left his young family on the station platform in Brighton. But he had probably been awakened (if he had had any sleep) by the sounds of war and there were things to do, new orders to implement and wounded to attend to and he had to hurry into another day. Seaforths – *“During the morning as they moved toward Leonforte, enemy fire became so focused and intent that it was suicidal to move.”*

At the upper edges of the saucer, Panzer troops had dug in and were shelling the Canadians. These men were no longer thinking of the glory of the German Third Reich and their mad Fuhrer Adolph Hitler and his “lebensraum”, but were doing what soldiers do; fighting, and hoping to prolong their own lives for a day or a week or whatever time they could buy. Their 88-millimetre weapon was mounted on a Tiger tank.

The five-member crew, equipped with earplugs against the horrific noise, received orders from their Forward Observation Officer, loaded the ammunition, pushed the shell into position and closed the breech. This may have been a single firing or part of a multiple firing pattern. The required directional and elevation instructions were fed into the gun by the sighter and the weapon was fired. As soon as the recoil ceased, they unloaded the empty shell and started again.



At around 4 P.M., two things happened which concern our story. Edmontons – *“At 1600 hours, as the Seaforths deployed to lead the attack, the Edmontons closed up to follow through. Unfortunately a salvo of the preliminary shoot (friendly fire) fell on Colonel Hoffmeister’s (Seaforth) Orders-Group, while it was tying in the last details of the assault. War Diary Fifth F.A. – “Lieutenant J. W. Stephens of B Company was wounded while attending an O-Group with the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada.”*

Major Maclean reported a different incident to me in 1976. Because of his direct contact with John, I feel this more accurately describes what really happened to John and has convinced me that he was not in fact at the O-Group meeting. Furthermore, because both events happened at the same time, I can understand how there might be confusion behind the lines as to where people were injured. Mclean - *“We ran into stiff resistance from German Panzer troops who had retreated to a strong position in Leonforte, which was on a rocky prominence at the north end of a valley. At the southern end of the valley was Valguarnera, where the section of the Fifth F.A., of which I was in charge (and your father was attached), set up an evacuation centre for wounded coming back down the valley. At one point the action was very heavy and our contact with the Edmonton’s Regimental Aid Post was cut off. Your father and a driver went forward in a Jeep-Ambulance and were preparing to return with casualties.”*



A FIELD SURGICAL UNIT

The introduction of this mobile unit into the R.C.A.M.C. early in 1943 marked a new phase in the treatment of casualties. The field surgical unit was designed primarily to provide facilities for surgery in the forward area and thereby increase the chances of survival and recovery for many casualties. Provided with modern equipment which enabled it to undertake the most urgent surgical cases, it was highly mobile and could be set up in a new location within 20 minutes of arrival and be ready to receive patients shortly afterwards.

The 88-millimetre shell came screaming into the area and, according to the wishes of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi cohorts, carried with it a full load of death and destruction. There was a stupendous explosion that shook the solid rock and a blast of furnace-hot air; shrapnel, rock, smoke and dust flew out in all directions.

Mowat describes a similar event, which took place a few months later – *“A shell from a long-range German gun came snoring overhead to bury itself in the centre of the area. The explosion seemed of unprecedented violence. I was standing some distance from the burst and as the concussion buffeted me I saw a massive cone of mud spring full blown, like an instant genie, out of the sodden ground. A hot wind filled my nostrils. Childlike I screwed my eyes tight shut against this terror and willed my body not to run. When I looked again it was to see a black crater where the regimental aid post had stood seconds earlier. There remained only some fragments of the equipment, which is intended to heal rather than destroy. There remained only bloodied fragments of the doctor, of the medical sergeant and half a dozen orderlies and stretcher-bearers.”*

That was not John's fate. Maclean – *“Johnnie was evacuated to my Ambulance Post on his own Jeep-ambulance (opposite). Naturally it was a great shock to see him wounded and near death, especially as I had been speaking to him just an hour before.”* Seaforths' Padre described a Regimental Aid Post – *“The jeeps roar up to the door, stretchers with their moaning load brought in and put on upturned boxes. Bloody bandages cut away, tunics and pants cut up, chloroform, tea, and plasma. Doctor works smoothly and staff does grand job.”* Maclean – *“He was evacuated down the line.”*

War Diary, Fifth F.A. – *“Lieut. Stephens was evacuated to Fourth Field Ambulance and First Field Dressing Station at Valguarnera and was operated on by doctors of the First Field Surgical Unit.”* Opposite is a war artist's painting of the area in front of that hospital. The picture on the previous page is of a typical Field Surgical unit, although it is in a portable tent, rather than in the school at Valguarnera.

Lieut. Cal Forward – *“John was seriously injured in action at the front and was brought to our hospital for emergency treatment. He insisted he would be all right and that some others should undergo treatment first. That wish was denied and he received priority treatment.”* Godtel – *“He was not the only one hit at the time, but insisted that others around him be looked after first - quite unselfish about it, which was typical about him in all respects.”*

Godtel - *“I arrived again at midnight. He was sleeping but woke up and spoke. I told him he would be OK and he said ‘sure, sure’. He was badly smashed up - compound fractures of the left thigh; left forearm and right hand smashed, head injury and lots of minor shrapnel wounds all over his body.”*

July 22, 1943 - War Diary, Fifth Field Ambulance *“Lieutenant J. W. Stephens died.”*

Godtel – *“When I returned the next day with his kit, which he had asked me to bring, I was told that he had slept most of the time until he passed away early in the afternoon. It was a terrific shock to me. It was my first experience at losing a close friend.”*

The beginning of the end had come with the screaming of an incoming shell, the deafening blast of hot air, flying pieces of shrapnel and, in the ultimate insult to God, flying clumps of earth and rock; a quick frantic patch-up and sedation, hurried transport on his own jeep-ambulance, triage, desperation surgery, a few moments of lucidity and conversation and then blessed unconsciousness.

The end came a few hours later, in a makeshift bed, in a makeshift hospital, in a strange country, where he quietly breathed his last breath.




I have spilled many tears as I reconstructed these events and I feel the same way as Farley Mowat who, when he looked at a mortally wounded friend and started to cry, said – *“Were my tears for those who had gone and who were yet to go, or was I weeping for myself and those who would remain?”*

POSTSCRIPT - WORLD WAR 2

- July 22, 1943 – Leonforte was captured
- July 25, 1943 - The King Of Italy dismissed Benito Mussolini from office.
- August 17, 1943 - All enemy troops were withdrawn from Sicily to the Italian mainland.
- September 3, 1943 - The Allied Eighth Army crossed over the Strait of Messina into Italy.
- September 8, 1943 - The Italian Armistice was signed between Italy and the Allies.
- September 12, 1943 - Mussolini was rescued from detention by Hitler and, with the support of German troops who were still fighting in Italy, was reinstated as leader of Italy.
- March 19, 1945 - With the war almost lost, Hitler issued an order *“for the destruction of all lorries, bridges, dams, factories and supplies in the path of the enemy”* and *“to shoot anyone who refused to carry out this order.”* Fortunately these orders were not fully carried out.
Around this time a German General said of Hitler *“There was for him no Germany, there were no German troops for whom he felt himself responsible; for him there was only one greatness which dominated his life and to which his evil genius sacrificed everything – his own ego”*.
Allan Bullock, in his book Hitler – A Study In Tyranny said – *“No man was ever more surely destroyed by the image he had created than Adolph Hitler.”*
- April 29, 1945 – Mussolini was shot and killed by Italian Partisans and his body was hung up in a square in Milan.
- April 30, 1945 – In an underground bunker in Berlin, Hitler shot himself in the mouth and died.
- May 7, 1945 – Germany surrendered.
- 1,031,902 male Canadians and 49,963 female Canadians had served in the war - 44,927 died, 53,145 were wounded and 8,271 taken prisoner.

POSTSCRIPT - HIS FELLOW OFFICERS

I realize that nobody would speak badly about John to his wife but I will include some of the things people told her when they wrote to her.

- Godtel - *"Everyone in the unit felt they had lost a true friend and a real man."*
- Forward - *"John died as he had served, a gallant gentleman and an honourable and true soldier. I attended his funeral conducted by Major Gordon Jones (from James Street Baptist Church, Hamilton) where he received military honours and wore the Union Jack on his last journey. He is buried in one of the prettiest copse of trees in Sicily."* This picture (right) may not be where he was buried but is typical of a temporary gravesite in Sicily and certainly fits Cal Forward's description.
- Major Edgar Bailey, Chaplain - *"He had an exceedingly bright personality, with a ready smile and a cheerful word. His rising up from the ranks was proof of his hard work and the respect of his men was proof of his ability."*
- Sgt. George Hewitt - *"He was a square shooter, a real pal for anyone to have and I miss him."*
- Lt. Col. J. Noble, C.O., Fifth Field Ambulance - *"From the time we touched down until he was hit, 'Stevie' was the epitome of selfless devotion and service to the troops. When he finished serving the Commandos, their Colonel gave him the unique honour of the privilege to wear the Commando Green Beret."*
- Maclean - *"Stevie was a grand companion, a good friend and a very fine officer."*
- Pvt. B. J. Miller (John's batman) - *"John was a very brave man and will remain in my mind for years."*



QUOTE NO. H.Q. 372-14-268 (Records-C)

DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE
ARMY

OTTAWA, CANADA.

August 21st 1943.

Mrs. Voy Elizabeth Stephens,
858 Shaw Street,
Toronto, Ontario.

Dear Madam:

I deeply regret to inform you that your husband, Lieutenant John William Stephens, gave his life in the Service of his Country in Sicily, on the 21st day of July, 1943.

From official information we have received your husband died as the result of wounds received in action against the enemy. You may be assured that any additional information received will be communicated to you without delay.

The Minister of National Defence and the Members of the Army Council have asked me to express to you and your family their sincere sympathy in your bereavement.

We pay tribute to the sacrifice he so bravely made.

Yours sincerely,


(H.F.G. Letson),
Major-General,
Adjutant-General.

GR/ME

POSTSCRIPT - THE STEPHENS FAMILY



Voy's sisters, Jean and Guelda, drove from Toronto to tell Voy and her young family the horrible news. Jean said later that it was the hardest thing she had ever had to do.

- Voy would receive at least 4 letters from John after she had been notified of his death and he didn't receive many of the last letters she had written.
 - She used John's \$1,000 insurance to make a down payment on the first home the family owned and moved to 73 Floyd Ave. in East York on October 28, 1943. She fought a lifelong battle to find enough money to care for her 4 children.
- I feel that her life never again reached the heights that she had experienced during the early years of her marriage to John. *"When your lover has gone."*
 - She died at age 76 from complications of Alzheimer's disease, which had plagued her for 10 years.
 - I suspect that she never really understood that he had not been killed by "friendly fire".
 - Harriet "Maw" Stephens, shown outside 424 Delaware Ave., died on July 14th, 1948 at age 79 (her son Gord said it was cancer). Her two husbands and sons Richard and John predeceased her.



John was later moved to the Canadian War Graves Cemetery (right) near Agira, Sicily.



John probably knew little (if anything) about:

- Thomas Judd, who crossed the Atlantic in the 1630's from England to Massachusetts.
- Shadrack Stephens, who sailed from Wales to South Carolina, fought against the Americans in the War of Independence in 1779, became a prisoner of war and pioneered land in New Brunswick and Upper Canada.
- John Devitt and his family, who fled poverty in Ireland in 1828 to clear bush in Upper Canada.
- John Williams, who laboured in the lead mines of Shropshire in the mid 1800's.
- His grandparents, Mary and Richard Williams, who died all too early from illnesses resulting from the living and working conditions of life in Shropshire, England in the mid 1850's.

But they were all part of him.

He may have known something about:

- His mother Harriet, living in a squatter's cottage and moving to Canada to seek a better life.
- Richard and Edwin Williams, dying in a fiery blast a few years before he was born.
- His Stephens' ancestors and their Ontario farming background.

They were a part of him too.

• He certainly knew about:

- World War I; Richard buried in France and Doc with scars on his lungs from mustard gas.
- The Great Depression and the challenge of earning a living during that time.
- Marriage and family and selling men's clothing at Eatons.
- Enlisting in the Medical Corps, training as a soldier and proudly achieving the rank of Lieutenant.
- The insanity of Adolph Hitler and Nazi Germany, although he would not have understood the hatred and resentment and the lust to dominate and destroy that ruled Hitler's mind.
- The horror of battle, mixed with the thrill of being able to help his wounded comrades.
- The fear and numbness of bleeding to death from the shattered remains of his leg and arms.

It all made up who he was and how he came to a horrible death at age 36, in a military hospital, in a strange town, in a strange country; worlds away from the life and family he had known.

Why he had to die is beyond my ability to understand. Even now 60 years later, people continue to die every day, all over the world, as a result of Man's inhumanity to Man. We seem to have learned nothing.

There they go marching all in step so gay!
Smooth cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns.
Blithely they go as to a wedding day, the mother's sons.

If I should die, think only this of me.
That there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever Canada.
In that rich earth, a richer dust's concealed, which Canada honed, shaped, made aware.
Rupert Brooke

He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much; who has enjoyed the trust of pure women, the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has left the world better than he found it, whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem or a rescued soul; who has never lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it; who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction.

Bessie Anderson Stanley, 1904



In October 1995, my son John and I became the first and only relatives to visit John's grave – more than half a century after he had died. The site contains 490 graves of Canadian military personnel. It is located on top a hilltop with views in all directions and is beautifully landscaped and maintained. As we drove away, we looked back and saw this rainbow, which appears to rise from the cemetery.



GOD'S RAINBOW